

In praise of trees

The leaves are now mostly gone from our deciduous trees, having given us that lovely burst of colour that marks the shortening of the days in Autumn. The browns, yellows and golds of oak, beech and chestnut. The fiery reds and oranges of acers and liquidambar. These leaf colours become visible for a short time as a result of diminishing sunlight and dropping temperatures. The tree's production of green chlorophyll ceases as it goes into winter dormancy, revealing the other coloured pigments that are always present in the leaves, but masked during the summer months. The shades and intensity of colour vary from year to year, depending upon ambient temperatures, the amount of rainfall and the amount of sunlight.



Nyssa sylvatica



Liquidambar styraciflua

Both the above trees are native to North America and are major contributors to the renowned 'fall' colours seen on the eastern seaboard. Not native to North Devon, but found in my garden in Ashford!

Trees are the biggest living organisms above ground (anyone know why I chose those words carefully?). They are of tremendous benefit to other living things. They absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, about 70% of which is then sequestered into the surrounding soil. They create a habitat for dozens of species. A recent study found over 200 different types of insect living in a single birch tree.

Down the century's trees have been a natural resource for man, used amongst other things for buildings, furniture, railway sleepers, pit props and fuel. It took wood from around 2,000 oak trees to build one of Nelson's line of battle warships.

All of that deforestation has come at a price. Only about 13% of the UK is now covered by a canopy of woodland. Fortunately, our increased awareness of global warming and habitat loss has spurred a real initiative to replant some of these lost trees.

During the tedious restrictions of 2020, a lovely new phrase has emerged, 'forest bathing'. I don't need to explain. Next time you are out for a walk, find a large mature tree and gaze at it for a while. Imagine its age and the changes it has seen. Imagine the weight of timber in the trunk and branches. Imagine the root structure necessary to support all of that. Imagine the host of bugs and birds that benefit from its existence. Be impressed.

If you are not able to go 'forest bathing', at least have a splash on the edge. It will do you good in these anxious times, I promise.



Late sunshine catching oaks and cherries – autumn 2018

Enjoy your Christmas and if, like me, you find yourself sitting by a log burner on a chilly winter evening, say 'thank you' to the log before committing it to the flames.

Best wishes and hoping for a much less socially distanced 2021,

Mike Moss – wildlife warden, APC